DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 269 PS 012 271

AUTHOR Eder, Rebecca A.
TITLE Young Children's Knowledge of Parental Caregiving Behaviors.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Child Health and Human Development (NIH), Bethesda, Md.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the Biennial Conference on Human Development (6th, Alexandria, VA, April 17-19, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Rearing: Observation: *Parent Role: *Preschool Children: Preschool Education: Pretend Play: Research Problems: *Role Perception: *Role Playing: Sex Differences: *Social Cognition
IDENTIFIERS *Naturalistic Studies

ABSTRACT

Preschool children's knowledge of adult caregiving behaviors was examined with a sample of 14 middle-class, Caucasian boys and girls between the ages of 24 and 27 months. Each child's caregiving behavior in a laboratory environment containing dolls, toy animals, and toy objects, while accompanied by his or her mother, was recorded independently by two observers. Videotapes were made of the play sessions which were 20 minutes in length. Observers recorded the following seven pre-defined caregiving activities: bathes, dresses, diapers, feeds, grooms, puts to bed, and shows affection. Additional observations of the detail with which children performed the behaviors were recorded from the videotape. All 14 children exhibited two or more of the caregiving behaviors: 13 exhibited three or more: and 11 exhibited four or more. Though there were no significant sex differences in the number of children exhibiting caregiver behaviors, girls displayed the first caregiving behavior significantly earlier in the session than boys. The children's caregiving behavior was characteristically highly detailed, not rudimentary. These results contradict previous findings that children do not demonstrate knowledge of others until they are 4 or 5 years old. (In conclusion, it is recommended that social understanding should be studied in the context of social interactions, and some difficulties in using social behavior as a measure of social cognition are pointed out.) (Author/RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED205269

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Young Children's Knowledge of Parental Caregiving Behaviors

Rebecca A. Eder

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Now at: Institute of Child Development
University of Minnesota

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Rebecca A. Eder
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS 012271

Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Southeastern Conference on Human Development in Alexandria, Virginia, April 1980. This research was supported by a Sigma Xi Grant-In-Aid to the author and by NICHD research grant HD01107 to Dr. Harriet L. Rheingold. Thanks are extended to Gwen Gustafson for her invaluable assistance on all versions of this paper. Thanks also to Lynne Baker-Ward, Peter Shile, and Meredith West for their comments on earlier drafts.

Young Children's Knowledge of Parental Caregiving Behaviors

Studies of children's social cognition have focused on children's ability to take a spatial perspective (Laurendeau and Pinard, 1970), to determine another's feelings (Borke, 1971; 1973), to ascertain another's thoughts (Selman, 1971; Flavell, 1968), to state another's intentions (Piaget, 1965), and to articulate another's personality characteristics (Livesley and Bromley, 1973). No studies of social cognition have focused on what children know about everyday adult behavior. The present study examines young children's knowledge of adult caregiving behaviors that are displayed in a naturalistic setting.

There is some evidence that young children know adult caregiving behaviors. Anecdotal reports and informal work (Valentine, 1942; Stern, 1924; Rheingold and Hay, 1978; Rheingold and Eder, 1979) indicate that children care for dolls, toy animals, and younger children. In addition, descriptions of children's play have suggested that children take on the parental role (Hartley, Frank, and Goldenson, 1952; Garvey, 1977). However, children's knowledge of caregiving behaviors has not been studied systematically.

Caregiving was defined in the present study as "the behaviors that parents perform for their young children: feeding, rocking, grooming, putting to bed, instructing, and so on" (Rheingold and Hay, 1978). It is likely that children know everyday adult behaviors long before they

understand what adults feel, intend, or think in very specific contexts. Because caregiving behaviors occur throughout a child's life, it was of interest to determine when children know these behaviors.

The subjects were 14 children, six boys and eight girls between the ages of 24 and 27 months (the mean age was 25.2 months). All the children resided in Chapel Hill, North Carolina--a small university town. All the children were white. Most of their parents had completed college and many had advanced degrees.

The study environment consisted of three interconnected rooms in a laboratory. The laboratory contained dolls, toy animals, and toy objects such as bottles, cups, spoons, diapers, bassinets, high chairs, cribs, and so on.

The mother, the child, and the experimenter met in the reception room and the mother was told the purpose of the study. She was asked to respond naturally to her child, but not to tell the child what to do. The mother and the child were then shown the study environment and the recording equipment. The 20-minute session began when the experimenter left the room.

The following pre-defined activities of the child to the dolls and toy animals were recorded independently by two observers: bathes, dresses, diapers, feeds, grooms, puts to bed, and shows affection. Additional observations on the detail with which children performed the behaviors were recorded from the videotape. The median percentage of observer agreement for the behaviors was 97 (the range was 85 to 100

percent).

All 14 children exhibited two or more of the caregiving behaviors; 13 of them exhibited three or more; and 11 exhibited four or more. On the average, children displayed five behaviors (this ranged from two to seven behaviors). The number and percentage of children exhibiting caregiving behaviors may be seen in Table 1. Twelve children (86%) put a toy to bed, 10 children (71%) fed the object, nine children (64%) bathed an object, eight children (57%) groomed an object, eight children (57%) dressed or diapered an object, six children (49%) showed affection to an object, and one child read to a doll.

Though there were no reliable sex differences in the number of children exhibiting caregiving behaviors, there was a reliable sex difference in the latency to the first caregiving behavior (Mann-Whitney $\underline{U} = 7$, $p < .01$). Girls displayed the first caregiving behavior reliably earlier in the session than boys. The mean latency for girls was one minute and twelve seconds (the range was five seconds to three minutes). The mean latency for boys was three and a half minutes (the range was 45 seconds to five and a half minutes).

What is most interesting in the results is the detail with which the children displayed the caregiving behaviors. All of the children performed the behaviors appropriately. In diapering, for example, children placed the diaper under the doll's bottom; in feeding, they placed the nipple of the bottle in the doll's mouth. All of the children who put an object into the cradle put the object's head at the end of the cradle

with the pillow.

Most of the children went beyond showing rudimentary caregiving behaviors to displaying minute details. For example, one child, after washing a doll's hair said "put on conditioner" and pretended to do so; another fetched a pillow to place under the doll's head before diapering the doll; many children wiped a doll's mouth after feeding it; many tucked an object under a blanket and rocked the cradle when putting an object to bed; one child first fed a doll, put the doll in the tub and bathed it, then put it on her shoulder and burped it.

The children made statements such as: "drink juice, baby" or "eat dinner, baby" during feeding, "Annie (the rag doll) nap," "night, night," or "go to sleep," during putting to bed. One child who was diapering a doll said "it's all icky," another child told a doll to "be good" as she patted the doll's bottom and put it to bed. Yet another child lifted the doll out of the crib and said "good morning baby, good morning."

In the present study, children two years of age displayed knowledge of a variety of caregiving behaviors to inanimate objects. Their behaviors were exact, appropriate, and in many cases revealed a combination of several detailed behaviors. These results confirm anecdotal reports (Valentine, 1942; Stern, 1924) and informal work (Rheingold and Eder, 1979) on children's caregiving behaviors.

Though previous research in social cognition (Selman, 1971; Shantz, 1975) has indicated that children do not demonstrate knowledge of others until they are four or five years old, the present study indicates that

children as young as two years have a knowledge of parental caregiving behaviors. I believe that the break with previous work in social cognition is due to both the present study's emphasis on children's knowledge of everyday parental behaviors and to the present work's naturalistic methodology.

Evidence has begun to accumulate, particularly from the area of memory development (see Wellman and Somerville, 1979; Ashmead and Perlmutter, 1979) that young children perform better on cognitive tasks which utilize events or objects that are part of children's everyday experiences. It is thought that the most accurate assessment of young children's cognitive capabilities comes in utilizing what has been referred to (Myers, 1979) as the "knowledge base" of the young child. The present study differs from previous work on children's social understanding by examining children's knowledge of behaviors that are likely to be included in the children's "knowledge base." While previous work has focused on children's knowledge of adult feelings (Borke, 1971; 1973), thoughts (Selman, 1971; Flavell, 1968) and intentions (Piaget, 1965), the present work investigated young children's knowledge of everyday parental caregiving behaviors. The finding, that young children do know these behaviors, allows one to speculate that children learn the everyday behavior of adults before they learn what adults feel, intend, or think.

Recent work (De Loache, 1979; Todd and Perlmutter, 1979) has shown the value of naturalistic methodology for studying young children's cognitive capabilities. I believed that naturalistic observation would give a better estimate of the young child's social-cognitive abilities than

more constrained methods which require the child's understanding of the task itself. My work differs from other work in social cognition by examining young children's naturalistic behaviors as a measure of their social knowledge. The results indicate that a naturalistic methodology does give a more accurate assessment of young children's knowledge of others than conventional measures of social knowledge (such as perspective-taking) which may require skills that are beyond the capabilities of the young child.

By definition (Shantz, 1975), the area of social cognition is both social and cognitive. In general, work in this area has focused on the cognitive half, and has utilized methods suited to studying cognitive development. Until recently (Nelson, 1980; Glick and Clarke-Stewart, 1978), the social half has been underrepresented. As a result, there is little evidence about the relationship between social cognition and actual social behavior. Recent investigators (Glick, 1978; Nelson, 1980) have suggested that social knowledge may, in fact, differ from object knowledge and should, therefore, be examined in a social context. Glick (1978) suggests that social understanding should be studied in the context of social interactions. I believe that this observation is an important one. It is likely that by studying social understanding in a social context, there will be a closer match between social cognition and social behavior.

The present work represents a first step toward this goal. It examined young children's behavior as a measure of their social knowledge. This method is attractive, particularly for studying young children,

because it does not require that the children report on either their own feelings, thoughts, or intentions or their knowledge of the feelings, thoughts, and intentions of others. Further, by examining children's social behaviors, one is examining social cognition and social behavior simultaneously.

Some of the findings of the present study can be used to illustrate some of the difficulties in using social behavior as a measure of social cognition. First, it is difficult to determine if children know that the behaviors that they display belong to particular persons or a particular role. For example, in the present study, one is unable to ascertain if children know that the caregiving behaviors that they exhibit comprise the parental role. Eventually one might want to separate knowledge of a particular person from knowledge of a role. In the present work, one is unable to determine if children display their own parents' behaviors, the behaviors of a more general parental role, or some combination of the two.

What I believe to be the more challenging difficulty in using children's social behaviors as a measure of their social knowledge is that at any point in time one social behavior may be the result of several social cognitions. In addition, not only can children's social behaviors indicate several social cognitions, but some of the social cognitions may be competing. For example, the findings of the present study indicate that both boys and girls know caregiving behaviors. The finding that boys, on the average, took longer to perform the first caregiving behavior than girls suggests that boys may also be starting to know that it is sex role inappropriate for them to display caregiving behaviors to dolls and

stuffed animals. This result indicates that one must proceed with caution in examining children's social behaviors as a measure of any one particular social cognition.

I believe that in spite of some of the difficulties, it is time for those studying social cognition to begin to examine children's social behaviors as a measure of their social knowledge. This is a particularly fruitful direction for those interested in examining the social understanding of very young children. I am optimistic that one will continue to find, as in the present study, that children have a knowledge of their social world earlier than previous work has indicated.

Table 1

The Number and Percentage of Children

Exhibiting Caregiving Behaviors

Behavior	Number of Children	% of Sample[a]
Puts to Bed	12	86
Feeds	10	71
Bathes	9	64
Grooms	8	57
Dresses or Diapers	8	57
Shows Affection	6	49
Reads	1	7

[a]Total number of children was 14.

References

Ashmead, D. H., and Perlmutter, M. Infant memory in everyday life. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, 1979.

Borke, H. Interpersonal perception of young children: Egocentrism or empathy? Developmental Psychology, 1971, 5, 263-269.

Borke, H. The development of empathy in Chinese and American children between three and six years of age: A cross-cultural study. Developmental Psychology, 1973, 9, 102-108.

De Loache, J. S. A naturalistic study of memory for object location in very young children. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, San Francisco, 1979.

Flavell, J. H. The development of role-taking and communication skills in children. New York: Wiley, 1968.

Garvey, C. Play. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977.

Glick, J. Cognition and social cognition: An introduction. In J. Glick and K. A. Clarke-Stewart (Eds.), The development of social understanding. New York: Gardner Press, Inc., 1978.

Glick, J., and Clarke-Stewart, K. A. (Eds.). The development of social understanding. New York: Gardner Press, Inc., 1978.

Hartley, R. E., Frank, L. K., and Goldenson, R. M. Understanding

children's play. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952.

Laurendeau, M., and Pinard, A. Development of the concept of space in the child. New York: International Universities Press, 1970.

Livesley, W. J., and Bromley, D. B. Person perception in childhood and adolescence. London: Wiley, 1973.

Myers, N. A. Exploring the knowledge base of very young children. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, San Francisco, 1979.

Nelson, K. Social cognition in a script framework. Unpublished manuscript, Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1980.

Piaget, J. The moral judgement of the child. New York: Free Press, 1965.

Rheingold, H. L., and Eder, R. A. Unpublished research, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1979.

Rheingold, H. L., and Hay, D. F. Prosocial behavior of the very young. In G. S. Stent (Ed.), Morality as a biological phenomenon. Berlin: Dahlem Konferenzen, 1978.

Selman, R. L. Taking another's perspective: Role-taking development in early childhood. Child Development, 1971, 42, 1721-1734.

Shantz, C. U. The development of social cognition. In E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), Review of Child Development Research (Vol. 5). Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Stern, W. Psychology of early childhood up to the sixth year of age (3rd ed.). New York: Holt, 1924.

Todd, C. M., and Perlmutter, M. Reality recalled by preschool children. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, 1979.

Valentine, C. W. The psychology of early childhood. London: Methuen, 1942.

Wellman, H. M., and Somerville, S. C. Everyday memory performances of toddlers. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, 1979.